THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY

By Robert A. Jelliffe

The legal documents, the pleas and counter-pleas, that Robert Browning unearthed while browsing among the remainders of a bookstall in Florence, "that memorable day"—the contents, in a word, of the *Old Yellow Book*, now among the choice possessions of the library of Oriel College—are not in themselves a tragedy, dark and tragic as the facts may be which they disclose. But that singular poem, *The Ring and the Book*, founded upon that material, is a tragedy, in the true sense of the word. "I fused my soul," Browning declared, "and that inert stuff." And only when such fusion takes place, only when a literary artist, bringing to bear on the raw fact of experience or observation or reading his own sense of truth, his shaping and organizing and illuminating command of his material, transmutes fact into truth, will the tragic circumstance —be it ever so stark and direful in itself—issue in tragedy. For tragedy, properly speaking, is not intrinsic in the stuff. Art is required as well as nature. However dramatic the method employed by the artist in presenting his material, however objective, the ultimate subjectivity must be present if tragedy is to result: the shaping and interpreting of the fact—the artist's clarification—is the agency which transmutes the base and inert metal into living gold.

This has been true, this transformation of the merely potential snbstance into an artistic fulfillment, from the earliest times of dramatic composition. From the days of Aeschylus to those of Eugene O'Neill the record is the same. Indeed, it is on this account that we may venture to assert the conjunction of tragedy and art, distinguishing between the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, on the one hand, and the true inwardness of those shocks, their calamitous implications, on the other. The literature of tragedy makes it continuously apparent that nature, of itself, presents but the initial points that art, with true divination, projects into the finished and transcendent curve.

Yet from one age to another—and this becomes the scope of my present survey—this curve of art obeys different compulsions. The idea of tragedy, the tragic view of life—call it what we will—varies as the whole concept of life undergoes change through the years. The Greeks understood by tragedy something quite different from the belief of the middle ages. Shakespeare's notion of tragedy has little resemblance, so it has been asserted, to Ibsen's. Every period shifts the emphasis, varies the hues, derives for itself different conclusions. The entire complex faith of an era, in truth, expressing itself, so far as that may be in the person of some great literary artist, finds utterance in the tragedy he composes: His eomprehension of the painful riddle of this earth, conditioned, as his understanding must always be, by the current of ideas and the complex of feelings to which he is subject, communicates itself inevitably to his work. A great tragedy, there-fore, a work of art nobly conceived, based on what Matthew Arnold terms a great action, and executed with adequate powers of expression, would afford us as true an estimate of the inner life, the actual heart-beat, of a given period as we are ever likely to secure. I propose to examine briefly a few of the typical concepts of tragedy as held at different times by the acknowledged great ones of the earth. And I must of course begin with the Greek idea of tragedy, exemplified by the work of the outstanding playwrights of the age of Pericles.

Professor Frye, in his acute and penetrat.ng scrutiny of Greek tragedy, fixes our attention on the sense of incongruity as the poet's basic idea. "It is just this disheartening consciousness of inconsistency," "he says," as between our knowledge of things as they are or seem to be and our vision of them as they should be, which it is one of the duties of the tragic dramatist to reinfoice and deepen by his treatment." The incongruity to which he refers is such as to "shock profoundly the moral prepossessions of the race—to shake, if not to unsettle, confidence in the moral order, in the moral reality of the universe." (We must observe, in passing, that Professor Frye attributes to Greek tragedy an acceptance of

the reality and the validity of the "moral order"—an acceptance that Joseph Wood Krutch assigns, in our day, to the limbo of outworn and credulous fetishes that wistful mankind has concocted for itself out of its forlorn sense of emptiness.) Professor Frye would instance, in support of his view of the tragic inconsistency he recognizes, the sacrifice of an innocent Iphigenia to the ambitious policy of a father; or of an Antigone to mere municipal convenience. Such wanton disregard of any directing equity in the world does profoundly dislocate our sense of justice, our very faith in a stable order of things, our ultimate conviction of the worth and rightness of moral order.

I like very much Mr. Frye's phrase for this feeling of insecurity and confusion engendered by such incongruity. He calls it the "tragic qualm." We experience that qualm whenever, in Greek drama, a collision takes place between our principles, desperately trusted, and the unpredictable and irrational actualities of life. These accidents of life threaten our dearest illusions. Transfer the feeling of economic and social insecurity that many a man is forced to feel whenever he contemplates the changing order in England and especially in Asia to-day to the feeling of moral confusion initiated in us by the "tragic qualm," and we may more accurately guage the devastation wrought in us by inequalities of this sort. We are left fearfully groping for some elusive and impalpable resource, some stability, in a world that mocks our quest.

Greek tragedy is not content, however, merely to excite in us this tragic qualm. The fearful apprehension must also be allayed. The poet of tragedy offers us his solution, composes for us in his own way the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the actualities of experience and the insistent urgencies of our conscience. This, it may be, is what Aristotle had in mind when he expounded his idea of the purification of the passions. For unless our pity and our fear do find some alleviation in the way of a resolution of our bewilderment, we remain rebellious, merely, or vanquished, or aghast.

Consequently, it is through the poet's answer to the question propounded in his play that he invests the tragedy with significance. Does he succeed in restoring for us some equipoise to our preconception of a stable world? If so, even if he only makes the attempt to do so, he illustrates for us the Aristotelian idea of what tragedy properly is.

Whatever his answer may be, in whatsoever way he endeavors to reconcile the tragic discrepancy between the data of experience and the desideratum of justice, he does assume the existence of a world held in moral equilibrium. Anything that tends to disturb that equilibrium, any act committed by a character however virtuous that might endanger that equipoise, he regards as reprehensible. Many an indivdual in the lists of *dramatis personae* of Greek plays acts on the basis of the most exemplary motives, and yet his doom is sealed. Why? Because his act, seemingly meritorious in itself, violated the moral law. And that law is immeasurably more important than he is, as an individual. The individual, wittingly or not, has been quilty and must suffer punishment. Ignorance is itself one form of guilt. Only in this way may the most precious reliance of mankind, the stability of moral law, be maintained.

I speak here, as you will see, of the most typical of Greek plays, not of all of them without exception; of Sophocles, moreover, rather than of Euripides; of the sort of tragedies, in a word, that Aristotle appears to have approved. The Euripedes *Medea*, for example, presupposes no such faith in the justice of the gods and in a moral order in the universe as that held by Sophocles and by Aeschylus. In fact it is Euripidean tragedy, which, in its resemblance to that of later days, may well serve as transition from the stricter tenets of the typical Greek idea of tragedy to that of our own time. Like Thomas Hardy in this respect, Euripides maintained that "Fate is dim, and all the gods obscure." In the *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's nurse says:

Yet all of man's life is but ailing and dim,
And rest upon earth comes never.

But if any far off state there be
Dearer than life to mortality,
The hand of the dark hath hold thereof,
And mist is under and mist above;
And so we are sick for life, and cling
On earth to this nameless and shining thing.
For other life is a fountain sealed,
And the deeps below us are unrevealed,
And we drift upon legends forever.

It is Sophocles, rather than Euripides, who may most advantageously be thought to excmplify the ideal Greek tragedy. The ways of the gods, he maintains, though hidden from the eyes of man, are just. Perhaps it is this moral certitude, which Matthew Arnold so earnestly desired for himself, and which, operating so magnificently in the writings of Sophocles, made the Victorian poet accord to his Greek forerunner such exceptional praise. In his sonnet addressed *To a Friend*, you may remember, he calls the roll of those great writers who, in days of stress, sustain his mind and spirit: Homer, Epictetus, Sophocles. And, speaking of the last of these three, he says,

But be his
My special thanks.....
Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole.

The medieval conception of tragedy as a lamentable reversal of worldly fortune, I name and pass over. Much might be said of it as an expression of the disastrous economic insecurity of that day and of the rôle played in men's lives by Fortune herself; but in moral and spiritual significance this idea of tragedy falls far below the level of the Greek idea, on the one hand, and of Shakespeare's idea, on the other. Chaucer's "tragedy" of *Troilus and Criseyde* has no such grandeur of conception as the *Electra* or *King Lear*. It is, to be sure, an absorbing psychological study; and in it, using Fortune as her agent, Destiny works her all-compelling will. "O Fortune, minister of Destiny," cries the poet, linking thus the caprice

of fortune, herself and the idea of an encompassing fate. But we read the *Troilus* principally for the interest we find in the romantic love story of a gallant youth smitten by the incalculable shafts of a despotic god, and a lady as arch, as demure, as wavering as she is enchanting. "Tendre herted, slydng of corage," Chaucer describes her—compassionate of heart, that is to say, but lacking in steadfastnes. As we read her story we feel that we also might be won by her charm, might willingly commit ourselves unreservedly to her inconstant keeping but we cannot feel that the poet presents to us an agonizing revelation of the "weary weight of all this unintelligible world."

Just this revelation is what we do find in Shakespeare. This world, this universe, to his deep-seeing eyes, is unintelligible. enigmatic. We need not assume that Macbeth is giving explicit utterance to Shakespeare's own conviction when he declares that life is "a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing." Probably not. But there is far less of the attempt to justify the ways of God to man, on Shakespeare's part, than there is on the part of the Greeks. The moral order still presides, to Shakespeare's way of thinking, but it does not wholly justify.

Shakespeare comes closest to the Greek poets in the grim and vivid exhibition of tragic calamity in his plays. But his resolution of the moral problem always involved in this enactment of life's distress is of his own age and of his own devising, not of theirs. He finds a means of assuaging our unhappiness, our outraged sense of the eternal fitness of things, not in persuading us to aceept the preservation of moral rightness, but rather in securing for his individual heroes our admiring and envious wonder. His Othello is a being of such magnificence, of so truly noble a nature and so true a heart, that even though he falls, he presides, we are fain to believe, over his destiny. The conspiracies of life are unable to domineer over his moral and spiritual grandeur. And the same is true of Hamlet. Our consternation at the enormity of suffering life calls upon such human beings to endure is appeased, in some part,

by their ability to undergo such suffering without being completely destroyed. For some indecipherable reason, life imposes on these representatives of a tasked humanity almost intolerable burdens, and life endows these same august creatures with sufficient hardihood to withstsand those burdens.

It is Santayana who says, in reference to Shakespeare's *Othello*, "Such is the essencc of great tragedy, the sense of the finished life, of the will fulfilled and enlightened: that purging of the mind so much debated upon, which relieves us of our pent-up energies, transfers our feelings to a greater object, and thus justifies and entertains oui dumb passions, detaching them at the same time for a moment from their accidental occasions in our earthly life."

If Sophocles saw life steadily and saw it whole, he may have done so because his regard was controlled by a faith in an orderly and moral cosmos,and because life was much less multifarious then, we like to believe, than it has since become. By Shakespeare's time it was far more difficult to offer a sensible interpretation of experience than it had been before. Shakespeare saw life vividly and was profoundly aware of its inexplicable mystery. The moral order of the universe had become subject to such various contradictions that it no longer commanded the full acceptance of the Elizabethan poet. He sought another supreme authority, and he found it in human greatness.

But to-day we are living, if the general tongue may be believed, neither in a world organized under the jurisdiction of an accepted moral law, nor in one ruled by the presiding genius of superior men. Our cosmos is mechanical. It is also speculative and quizzical. It asks, with disconcerting directness, how the moral law, if ever it did control the destinies of men, came into existence. Who gave it its patent of authority?

Hauptmann, for one example, uudertook in his play *Rose Bernd* to overthrow the entire traditional view of tragedy and to substitute, for the punishable guilt of man, the disorder of the world and of the universe. He is the dramatist of compassion—the tragic emotions,

that is to say, are altered in his representation of life. Man, unfortunate creature that he is, caught in the toils of calamitous circumstance, finds himself unfairly opposed by hostile forces too great for his own powers. Nevertheless, on occasion he wins, like a football team that, though outweighed, holds its rival to a scoreless tie; he wins a "moral victory." But that sort of victory is not much more welcome in literature, after all, than it is on the football field.

In *The Weavers,* another one of Hauptmann's plays, it is the social organization which drives pitiful human beings to a frenzy of despair and revolt. This is a propaganda play, to be sure, like Galsworthy's *Strife* or *Justice*; but even so it exemplifies the tragic conviction that man, no longer proud but pitiful, wages an unequal strife in a losing cause.

Modern tragedy, in other words, no longer undertakes the heroic or the sublime. It has reduced the scale. We men are a little breed, now, it says, in comparison with the compulsions of conditioned reflexes, behavior patterns, the speed of light, the geologic measurement of time. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the modern writer of tragedy looks upon the tragic qualm of the present, and calls upon us in our turn to look at if, with eyes mournful with pity and compassion.

It was the German critic, Lessing, who wrote: "The fortunes of those whose circumstances most resemble our own naturally penetrate most deeply into our hearts, and if we pity kings we pity them as human beings, not as kings." That is to say, tragedy brings itself down to the level of the ordinary man. So we hear Masefield saying,

Others may sing of the wine and the wealth and the mirth,
The portly presence of potentates goodly in girth:—
Mine be the dirt and the dross, the dust and the scum of the earth!

And this democratic manifesto finds an echo in the play *Marco Millions:* "One's loving kindness should embrace all forms

of life, one's compassion should suffer with the suffering, one's sympathy should understand all things, one's judgment should regard all persons and things as of equal importance."

No longer is our view of life anthropocentric to any such degree as that held by the Greeks and by Shakespeare. No longer could a character in a present day tragedy say, with Hamlet, "What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" Modern science has cast discredit on such hyperbole. Man now is subject to the enmity of natural forces, as in Synge's *Riders to the Sea;* to heredity and environment, as in Ibsen's *Ghosts;* to ruthless social systems, as in Galsworthy's *Justice.* And mere unaccommodated man is no match for such adversaries.

A few moments ago I spoke of Euripides as affording a transi- from the typical Greek idea of tragedy to our present understanding of that concept. He does so, I should say, in the emphasis he puts on humanitarian principles. His plays offer illustrative examples of the frailties of mortal men, of their weakness and of their vice. In these respects he reminds us of Ibsen. For the latter, as well as for the former, the heroic no longer exists. So it is that Joseph Wood Krutch can say of Ibsen that "his persons have shrunk and his tragedy has lost that power which real tragedy always has, of making that infinitely ambitious creature called man content to accept his misery if only he can be made to feel great enough and important enough.....There is no virtue or no vice which he can possibly have which can be really important; and when he dies, neither his death nor the manner of it will be any more important than that of a rat behind the arras."

These are strong terms, and not to be accepted without protest. Art we indeed sunk so low? By way of partial answer I present one or two more bits of evidence, The prosecuting attorney, Mr. Krutch, might direct our attention to the Theodore Dreiser novel,

An American Tragedy. He would insist that in this snivelling young murderer, Dreiser has sunk to the lowest depths, that the title is a saddening misnomer, and that we have here to do, therefore, not with the tragic fallacy so much as with the pathetic. It may perhaps be remembered that when this work was transcribed for the screen the author was incensed beyond measure. He insisted that the movie director had completely ruined his story. Apparently what had been done—I have not seen the play—was to shift the emphasis from the tragic guilt of society (which was what Dreiser intended) to the pitiful guilt of an inconsequential bit of human flotsam, But in either case this is not tragedy in the grand manner. In either case the boy who kills the girl he has seduced, so that he may be free to marry the girl of means, whether he is the victim of a social background that has failed to qualify him for true living, or whether he is an impotent pawn in a game that calls, instead, for kings, is no fit protagonist for tragic heroism. Paul Elmer Moore, referring scathingly to this modern novel among others of much the same order, makes the pertinent comment that the real American tragedy in this instance is to be found in the life of the author of the book—a thwarted, stunted, starved boyhood and early manhood.

My other bit of evidence is on the side of the defense. It consists in the work of Eugene O'Neill. His tragedies, to be sure, are for the most part bleak enough, but there is in them also power, vividness, an intensifying of the individual's response to experience. He does represent man as victim: of life, of Nature, of circumstance. His theme, more often than not, is the disintegration of character. But always the interest is centered on the mental processes of the victim, and usually the destructive force is an inner one. His tragic world is deterministic and pessimistic. He has come to portray human existence as a tragedy of spiritual frustration, probably because he feels this to be also the almost universal condition of American life. It is a grim and forbidding interpretation of our world, but at least it can be said of O'Neill

that he conveys the sense of complete sincerity, and that he provides examples of intensely realized tragic suffering.

The renaissance of humanism, already observable as dawn's suffusion of the darkness of materialism, bids fair to recapture some of our lost belief in the potential greatness of the individual. If that dawn deepens into full daylight, if the human values of our life take precedence once again over the more narrowly scientific values, then modern tragedy will follow suit and assume once more the grandeur it has forfeited. For tragedy, as one form of art in general, finds such alleviation for the distress with which it is commingled in whatever largeness of faith the age in which it appears is competent to hold. If the human spirit transcends its mundane involvement, in days to come, tragedy will echo that achievement in terms of protagonists who arouse our envious admiration.

For the moment, however, our modern idolatry of science affords us at best only a plaintive retreat into an almost universal inferiority complex. We have lost faith in man. Until we succeed in regaining our belief in human greatness. until we recapture our sense of moral and spiritual protection, we shall be condemned to take refuge in a commiserating sadness of tone in the plays we write, however brilliant in other respects many of these productions may be. There is, inevitably and always, an exact ratio between the spiritual temper of the time and the idea of tragedy that exemplifies the temper of that time. The one is an index of the other. In any age, the concept of tragedy derives from the age itself and is answerable to its faith in life, faith in man, faith in the presence and power of moral and spiritual values.